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**"Stinging" in *Circles*: A Creative
Exchange Between E. E. Cummings and
Luciano Berio**

Charles Stratford

Music is translated, apparently, only when a specific need arises and we are compelled to go from the actual musical experience to its verbal description, from the sound of one instrument to another, or from the silent reading of a musical text to its performance. In reality this need is so pervasive and permanent that we are tempted to say that the history of music is indeed a history of translations. But perhaps all of our history, the entire development of our culture, is a history of translations. Our culture has to possess everything, therefore it translates everything: languages of all kinds, things, concepts, facts, emotions, money, the past and the future, and, of course, music. . . . The history of vocal music is also the history of translation of a text into music. . . . If a musical thought is to manifest itself in full relation to a text, it must be able to modify that text, to carry out an analytical transformation of it, while of course remaining conditioned by it.

—Luciano Berio (1925-2003), *Remembering the Future* (31, 50)

Given as part of the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University in 1993-94, this passage shows a mature Luciano Berio reflecting on the history of vocal music in broad terms. This commentary sets an appropriate context for some of the Italian composer's ground-breaking works for voice, particularly those that make innovative uses of a text. Premiered in 1960, *Circles* is a work that stands out in this regard. Setting three poems by E. E. Cummings ("stinging," "n(o)w" and "riverly is a flower"), *Circles* demonstrates how Berio and his then wife and collaborator Cathy Berberian were more interested in the sound of the words and their visual layout on the page than in the poems' semantic features. Scored for female voice, harp, and two percussion ensembles, *Circles* shows Berio analyzing the phonetic properties of Cummings' visually striking text and carefully corresponding them with the broad palette of sound offered by the instrumental ensemble—creating, in effect, a fluid translation between a poetic text and

its musical realization in performance, even between the variegated colors of Berberian's voice and a wide array of un-pitched percussion sounds.

The documentation of Berio's potential musical "modification" and "analytical transformation" of Cummings' work in *Circles* lies in an extant sketch housed at the Paul Sacher Foundation Archive (see Document A, page 59). Drawing upon Document A, this essay attempts to reconstruct how Berio set Cummings' work to music in *Circles*. How and why did Berio select these three poems? How exactly did Berio respond to their phonetic and typographical elements? What do the sketches of *Circles* tell us about Berio's explorations in the relationship between language and music? How might an encounter with *Circles* influence one's connection with a poem like "stinging"?

Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962) wrote nearly 2,900 poems, two autobiographical prose works, four plays, and a series of essays. His themes range from love and nature to violence, the surreal, and the erotic. Known for his unconventional approaches to grammar and syntax, Cummings also experimented with the visual structure in many of his poems, via inventive punctuation, parentheses, capitalization, and spacing.

Cummings' work held great appeal for many twentieth-century composers. Norma Pollack notes that at least 168 of his poems have been used in 370 compositions by approximately 143 composers, most of them American (121). Consider a few examples of the latter. One of the earliest settings of Cummings' works is Aaron Copland's "Poet's Song," for voice and piano (1927). John Cage wrote three works that used poems by Cummings—his "5 Songs for Voice and Piano" (1938), as well as two works intended for dance: "Forever and Sunsmell," for one voice and two percussionists (1942), and "Experiences No. 2," for solo voice (1948). Scored for soprano, cello, and piano, Morton Feldman's "4 Songs to e.e. cummings" (1951) sets four poems by Cummings: "air," "blac," "moan," and "(sitting in a tree-)." Other works contemporaneous to *Circles* were Peter Schickele's "3 Choruses from Cummings" (1960) and Ned Rorem's setting of Cummings' "in the rain" in his song cycle "Poems of Love and the Rain" (1962-63). Composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein (who premiered the revised five-movement version of Berio's *Sinfonia* in 1970) completed his "Songfest" for six solo voices in 1973, which included a poem by Cummings titled "If you can't eat you got to," scored for tenor solo.

While individual motivations differ, the majority of the composers, in

Pollack's words, tended to "avoid transforming into music poems that are satirical, political, polemical, graphically sexual or violent in content . . . and those that lack musical qualities and visual imagery" (129). Rather, they opted to "gravitate toward the traditional subject matter of lyric poetry, such as nature, love, subjectivity, and the cycle of life and death, and toward those poems that communicate significance and effect via intense sensory means—kinetic, visual, aural" (129).

Berio-Cummings Correspondence

Berio's relationship with Cummings is neither clear nor well documented. There are three extant letters that chronicle Berio's correspondence with Cummings in the fall of 1960. Their first documented contact, a letter now held in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, is dated October 21, 1960, and reads as follows:

Dear Mr. Cummings,

I am deeply sorry that in spite of all my efforts, I was not able to contact you personally while I was in the States working on "Circles", my composition based on your poems (# 25, 76, and 221 of the "Collected Poems"). I cannot believe that you really know how difficult it is to get in touch with you. My friend Edgar Varese also tried, but in vain.

I understand that you are in Europe at present. In the hopes that this letter of mine will reach you, I would like to ask you if there is any possibility of meeting you. Since I shall be travelling extensively in Europe within the next two months, it is possible that our steps may cross somewhere.

The reason I would like to meet you is not merely a musical one: in these last few years, that is, since my knowledge of the English language has become more substantial, I have finally been able to approach that which interests me most in contemporary literature – your works and those of James Joyce. In consequence, I have developed several ideas and projects which I would like very much to discuss with you.

As you know, I would also like to have your kind permission for the use of your poems in "Circles." Since numerous performances of

the piece have been requested in Europe, as well as in the States, this season, it would be advisable to have your clearance on this matter as soon as possible in order to confirm performing dates with the necessary advance notice.

Concerning the performance of “Circles” at Tanglewood, I should like to clarify the matter. It was a performance by invitation only, not for a paying public. The fact that it was reviewed was unexpected and incidental. As you may know, however, I did try my best to contact you before the performance but without any result.

My wife, who performed in “Circles” at Tanglewood, joins me in hoping to meet you soon, and encloses a review of that performance which may be of interest to you.

Looking forward to hearing from you, I remain – Sincerely, Luciano Berio.¹

While noting Cummings’ elusiveness, Berio appears civil in asking to set Cummings’ poem to music, even though *Circles* had already been premiered by Berberian at Tanglewood that summer.

Cummings’ response (dated November 16, 1960, and housed at the Sacher Foundation) is mostly businesslike, specifying some of the corrections that he wanted Berio to honor in his published version of *Circles*. Cummings even forewarns Berio in this letter: “Please understand that whenever someone ‘sets’ a poem of mine I insist on seeing his score simply as a means of making sure he hasn’t miscopied or otherwise mangled my work. (Manglers, as you’re doubtless aware, are legion).” This letter also includes a friendly invitation: “I hope that, when you’re next hereabouts, you’ll telephone [...] & arrange with Marion to drop in, with your wife, some afternoon for a cup of tea or a drink (or both).”² In spite of his concerns that Berio might have “miscopied or otherwise mangled [his] work,” Cummings extends a hand of friendship to Berio and his wife Cathy—a feeling that is reciprocated in Berio’s reply dated November 24, 1960 (archived at the Houghton Library). In this third letter, Berio expresses how he is “deeply grateful” for his correspondence and that he will honor the necessary revisions that Cummings specified. Moreover, Berio invites Cummings to a performance of *Circles* on February 5 at The New School in New York City, and thanks Cummings for his inspiring work.

Dear Mr. Cummings,

I am deeply grateful to you for your letter. I was aware of the missing hyphens you had mentioned in your letter, as well as the “s” in “ghosts” and had already corrected them.

Now I am revising a few more things: in the development of poem #224, increasing musically its “work in progress” qualities (the “open form”, I’d say). I am also revising musically the second appearance of poem #25.

My wife and I will be arriving in New York at the end of January and we will start our tour which is based on “Circles” with 2 performances at the New School around February 5th. I hope that you will be able to attend at least one of these 2 performances and I hope that in hearing it you will get back musically at least a part of what I received from your poems, for which I am indebted to you.

Naturally, Cathy and I will be delighted to meet you at your home. Soon after we arrive in New York we will call and arrange for it. Our very best wishes to you,

Sincerely,
Luciano Berio.³

The archives at the Houghton Library and the Paul Sacher Foundation do not contain any other correspondences between Berio and Cummings. Whether or not Berio and Cummings had any conversations regarding the “several ideas and projects” that Berio expressed excitement about in the October 21 letter is uncertain. From this documentation, it appears that their friendship and collaboration was rather short-lived, particularly since *Circles* was finished just two years before Cummings’ death in 1962.

Berio’s Interest in English Authors

Berio credits his ongoing interest in the English language to Italian semiologist and author Umberto Eco.⁴ Berio, Eco, and Berberian collaborated on a radio program entitled *Onomatopoeia nel linguaggio poetico* (“Onomatopoeia in Poetic Language”), which involved literary works by Edgar Allan Poe, Dylan Thomas, and W. H. Auden. This collaboration

evolved into a more full-fledged work—one that typifies Berio’s interests in English texts at the time—his *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, a piece featuring Cathy Berberian’s voice, completed in 1958.⁵

As an outsider to the English language, Berio confessed that his attraction to Joyce’s work was primarily a result of its onomatopoeic properties, mentioning how “*Ulysses* is a triumph of onomatopoeia” (142-143). In *Thema*, his use of Joyce’s text centers on the “Sirens” chapter in *Ulysses*, the content of which centers on music. David Osmond-Smith, in his monograph on Berio, comments on the composer’s approach to *Thema*:

Joyce had extracted from his musicalized narrative a mosaic that developed its own semantic and musical potentials. Berio now extracted from that mosaic purely musical elements, and used them to explore the borderline where sound as the bearer of linguistic sense dissolves into sound as the bearer of musical meaning: a territory that over the next decade he was to make very much his own. (62)

By dealing with an English text primarily in terms of its acoustic properties, Berio treats it as what Osmond-Smith calls “a quarry for phonetic materials” (65).

In the letter to Cummings dated October 21, 1960, Berio admits that since his facility with the English language had much improved, he was able to engage more directly with the works of Joyce and Cummings (see full letter above). Berio’s early experiences with these two authors then opened the door to subsequent pieces that draw upon more work by English language authors: James Joyce again, in *Epifanie* (1961); Samuel Beckett, in *Sinfonia* (1968); and W. H. Auden, in *Un re in ascolto* (1983).

Three Poems by Cummings

In *Circles*, Berio (with Berberian’s assistance) chose three poems by Cummings (the only works by Cummings that he ever set to music): “stinging” (CP 63), “riverly is a flower” (CP 106), and “n(o)w” (348). The first two poems appear in Cummings’ first collection of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys*, published in 1923. The poem “n(o)w” comes from a later book, *ViVa* (1931). While Berio’s selection of Cummings’ poems was largely based upon their acoustic qualities, semantics still played a role.

“Stinging” appears in the first and fifth movements of *Circles*.

stinging
gold swarms
upon the spires
silver

chants the litanies the
great bells are ringing with rose
the lewd fat bells
and a tall

wind
is dragging
the
sea

with

dream

-S

(CP 63)

Originally titled “Sunset,” “stinging” was first published in the little magazine *Broom* in July of 1922. It was then republished in the 1923 *Tulips and Chimneys* as part of a set of five poems titled “Impressions,” all of which capture city imagery related to changes of light in the course of a day (e.g., the late afternoon sky, twilight, sunset)—the five together constituting what Milton Cohen calls a “diurnal cycle” (176). The concluding poem in this set, the imagery of “stinging” functions as the last link in this description of a process. Cohen observes how “‘stinging’ overlaps the nightfall of ‘the hours’ by moving from the late-afternoon gold on church spires, through the sunset rose of the bells, to the “dream // -S” of night” (177). Berio’s use of a poem that deals with “cyclical motions of nature” clearly befits a piece like *Circles* (Cohen 176).

Set in Movement III of *Circles*, “n(o)w” is part of a series of seven poems in *ViVa* whose content centers on sky, weather, and landscapes. As Rushworth Kidder notes, the poem that immediately precedes “n(o)w” deals with the transition from autumn to winter, while the one that follows describes a sunrise or moonrise (93-95).

n(o)w
the
how
dis(appeared cleverly)world
iS Slapped:with;liGhtninG
!
at
which(shal)lpounceupcrackw(ill)jumps
of
THuNdeRB
loSSo!M iN
-visiblya mongban(gedfrag-
ment ssky?wha tm)eani ngl(essNessUn
rolli)ngl yS troll s(who leO v erd)oma insCol
Lide.!high
n , o ; w :
theraIncomIng
o all the roofs roar
drownInsound(
&
(we(are like)dead
)Whoshout(Ghost)atOne(voiceless)O
ther or im)
pos
sib(ly as
leep)
But !look—
s
U
n:starT birDs(IEAp)Openi ng
t hing ; s(
—sing
)all are aLl(cry aLl See)o(ver All)Th(e grEEen
?earth)N,ew (CP 348)

Emphasizing phases of transition, the context and the content of “n(o)w” make it strongly akin to “stinging.” Offering an evocation of a thunder-

storm, the imagery of “n(o)w” portrays the darkness before the storm, the ensuing lightning and thunder, and the disintegration of the storm as the sky clears. Indeed, the turbulent qualities present in “n(o)w” are mirrored by the volatile character of Movement III, a climactic point in the work characterized by its cacophonous percussion and the disintegration of its text.

For Movements II and IV, *Circles* sets “riverly is a flower” (CP 106), which fluctuates between lively water imagery (“riverly,” “rain,” “cloud-gloss,” “mist-flowers”) and ruminations on death and the macabre (“tomb,” “morte carved smiles,” “moan-loll,” “ghosts”).

riverly is a flower
gone softly by tomb
rosily gods whiten
befall saith rain

anguish
and dream-send is
hushed
in

moan-loll where
night gathers
morte carved smiles

cloud-gloss is at moon-cease
soon
verbal mist-flowers close
ghosts on prowl gorge

sly slim gods stare

While this poem’s language does not echo the cyclical natural imagery of the other two poems, its focus on death and the metaphysical suggests the “circle of life” as it relates to the inevitable limits of mortality. The living face the dead in the graveyard as the human observer confronts ghostly white statues. Here we catch an after-glimpse of the departed—remembered by day with a flower, while by night spirits wander and “gods stare.”

The Visual and the Phonetic

Aside from the theme of cyclical change in these poems, two broader dimensions to the poems held great appeal for Berio (and Berberian): the visual and the phonetic.

Cummings experimented with visual structure in many of his poems through the manipulation of punctuation, parentheses, capitalization, and spacing; his approach to typographical space set him apart from most of his literary peers. This clearly interested Berio. In a 1981 interview with Bálint András Varga, Berio explains in detail why he was attracted to Cummings' work when composing *Circles*. Following Varga's observation that "*Circles* is indeed a unique alloy of music and poetry," and that he "felt while listening to it that the music influenced [Cummings'] poetry, gave it new meaning and raised it on to a different plane," Berio responded:

That was precisely my objective. Sometimes the visual aspect of the cummings poems reminds me of a battlefield, you could also say that the different elements of the words copulate with one another to form new words. It is all very expressive and forceful, and naturally it conditions the musical realization. I grouped the instruments around the text, reflecting the phonetic families so that the sound is sometimes short-circuited and explodes. (144)

As mentioned above, the visual aspect of "n(o)w"—the least typographically conventional of the three poems—provides the best example of how "the words copulate with one another to form new words." Sentences and individual words are chopped up, reordered, and assigned oddly-placed parentheses and capitalizations (see the complete text of the poem, above). New meanings necessarily emerge. Indeed, the visual and semantic elements are especially intertwined in a poem like "n(o)w."

Berio's final sentence in the above excerpt suggests the other key facet of Cummings' poems that inspired Berio—the phonetic. In particular, the phonetic properties of the text shape Berio's use of instrumentation. In the interview with Varga, Berio makes his intentions clear: "I did not write a piece for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment, but rather one where there is a very strong connection between the phonetic quality of the text and the musical texture" (144).⁶ In *Remembering the Future*, a recently published collection of lectures delivered by Berio at Harvard University in 1993-94, the composer provides even more detail:

The three cummings poems take on the role of generators of musical and/or acoustical functions. . . . The choice and use of the percussion instruments and of the harp are dictated by specific phonetic models: the instruments play, so to speak, the voice and the words. They play different modes of attack, vowels and consonants (fricatives, sibilants, plosives, and so on). The instruments translate and prolong the vocal behaviors, insisting upon them, in a sort of onomatopoeia or, rather, vocal-instrumental bilingualism. (118)

Berberian's comments found on the Universal Edition webpage confirm Berio's assertions regarding the genesis of *Circles*. It was her initial reading that influenced how Berio correlated the instrumentalists with her voice:

Luciano picked out three poems by Cummings and asked me to read them as I wanted to, paying attention to the particular distribution of the text, the unusual word breaks, and the capital letters that emphasized certain sounds. Then he wrote out the relationship between me and the instrumentalists, who were to produce sounds similar to the word that I was pronouncing, and I was to adjust the sound of the spoken word to the sound of the instruments. For example, the word "sting-" at the beginning corresponds exactly to the sound of the harp. This was a completely new kind of interaction for me, a kind of permanent exchange, an extraordinarily stimulating challenge.

While Berberian was encouraged to read the poems in a way that suited her, she took cues from their visual arrangement (i.e., "the distribution of the text"). Moreover, the fluid exchange between instrument and voice that Berberian describes supports Berio's aforementioned notion of how "vocal-instrumental bilingualism" is essential to the piece.

Cummings' Musical Typography

Not long before writing "stinging" and "riverly is a flower," Cummings began to explore typographical play modeled after a text's phonetic properties, in an effort to make music out of spoken words.

The best example is his "two / brass / buttons" (written 1916-17). Drafts of the poem show a visual arrangement akin to a musical score. On the left of the first draft is a short vertical stack of dots that acts as a staff (see Co-

hen 221). Whole words follow from left to right, and rise and fall on the page due to the pitch of their individual vowel sounds, behaving like notes in music: short vowels are high, while long ones are low. And, as Cohen observes, the twelve different vowel pitches employed in this poem reference the twelve tones of the octave (220). In the finished work, these horizontal series of individual words are then vertically realigned according to their vowel sounds. The disjunctive appearance of the poem aims to capture the “drunken recollection” of the speaker (Kennedy 118).

	two	brass	buttons	off	
	your	scar	let		coatlo
			ret	taone	old dint
			ed		and
a	new		one		
	you			don't	re
			mem		
		ber			
	you were		drunk		

The resulting poem offers a vertical arrangement of vowels that emulates the vertical element of conventional chords in music—i.e., the concurrent sounding of three or more pitches. However, due to the impossibility of simultaneously occurring words in speech, Cummings admitted to the shortcomings of this technique (Cohen 220). Nevertheless, these interart explorations rooted in typographical play spawned even more sophisticated prosodic procedures. As Michael Webster points out, by manipulating spacing, capitalization, and the number of syllables in a line of text, Cummings would later embed intricate mathematical patterns in his poems (e.g., “weazened Irrefutable unastonished” [CP 253], published in 1926); this approach would yield an “occult musical structure” where the silent numerical prosodic structure is analogous to the mathematical structures heard in melody and counterpoint (Webster 425, 429).

If “n(o)w” is distinguished by its visual elements, and “stinging” by its phonetic properties, a poem like “two / brass / buttons” stands out for its careful integration of the visual and the phonetic. As sight, sound, and semantic meaning often converge in the handful of poems surveyed here, we

witness some of the hallmarks of Cummings' emerging style that attracted Berio.

Berio's Annotated Copy of "stinging"

The limited number of relevant archival sources makes it difficult to trace the direct influence of Cummings' typography on Berio's compositional process in *Circles*. However, there is a one-page sketch that shows how Berio dealt with Cummings' text, referred to here as "Document A" (see facing page).⁷ A close reading of this document substantiates the relationship between the text's phonetic dimension and the work's instrumentation in Berio's setting of "stinging" in Movement V.

Housed at the Sacher Foundation Archive, Document A is the only surviving sketch that illustrates Berio's work with Cummings' poem "stinging." In this sketch, Berio groups words according to their phonetic makeup, not their actual meaning. This sketch also lays out all of the creative options that these thirty-one words offer. Berio exhibits his sensitivity to the sounds of the words in this poem in three ways: (1) he realigns words according to their shared phonetic properties; (2) he color-codes specific vowels and consonants; and (3) he underlines and enumerates certain vowel sounds.

Berio begins by retyping Cummings' fifteen-line original and arranging it into thirty lines, with almost every word given its own line. In order to vertically align certain words, Berio expands and condenses their typographical space, resulting in four columns connected by hand-written vertical lines. The first three lines are in black ink, while the fourth is in blue. This new alignment groups words according to their shared phonetic properties.

Column 1 contains only consonants. Most of these consonants are sibilant fricatives (e.g., the first /s/ in "swarms"), while some are sibilant affricatives (e.g., /ch/ in "chants"). All of these consonants appear in first position (i.e., they begin a given word), and the most frequent sibilant found in Column 1 is /s/, appearing six times. Column 2 aligns mostly consonant clusters. Some begin with the fricative /s/ (e.g., /s/ in "stinging"), and others begin with the fricative /th/ (e.g., /th/ in "the").⁸ Every word aligned and circled in black in Column 3 contains plosive consonants. Some occur at the beginning of a word (e.g., "gold," "bells," and "tall"), while others occur in the middle of a word (e.g., the first /g/ in "stinging" and the /t/ in "litanies").⁹ In Column 4, four words ("with," "lewd," "wind," and "with")

are aligned according to their vowel sounds, and all four of these words in this column end with consonants.¹⁰

Berio uses black, blue, red, and green pencil to identify the different families of consonants and vowels in this poem. He tallies their frequency in the left-hand column of the sketch using Arabic numerals. Black is reserved for consonants, usually in first position. Blue is only used for consonants that are found in final position (e.g., the final /s/ in “spires,” “chants,” and “bells”). Green and red apply only to vowels. All vowels circled in green represent a handful of related vowel sounds (e.g., [ə] in “the” and “silver” as well as the [æ] in “and,” “fat,” and “dragging”). Only five vowels are circled in red. Three of the five share one vowel sound, [a] (“swarms,” “upon,” “tall”); the other two share a different one, [o] (“gold” and “rose”). The method of color-coding vowels and consonants is only partially related to the four columns described above: the vertical lines in Columns 1 and 2 align only the consonants circled in black, while the lines in Column 4 align only those consonants circled in blue.

Almost every remaining vowel in Document A that has not been circled in green is underscored in black and red. Each underscored vowel is also assigned a number, starting with the two [i]’s in “stinging” (labeled numbers 1 and 2), and ending with “dream” (labeled number 17). Moreover, almost all of these underlined vowels are either long [i] (“dream”) or short [I] sounds (“with”). While the meaning of this enumeration is not immediately apparent, it seems that Berio is thinking in terms of serial operations by applying a series of numbers to a set of related vowel sounds.

Overall, Document A shows Berio’s systematic interpretation of the phonetic makeup of Cummings’ poem.¹¹ Berio’s spatial rearrangement of the poem’s words clearly differentiates between what he calls the “phonetic families”: Column 1 groups only sibilant fricative or affricative consonants, while Column 3 aligns only plosive consonants. Moreover, Column 1 shows that Berio is particularly attracted to sibilants, as half of the 14 consonants that are circled in black and aligned in Column 1 are sibilant consonants.

While it is difficult to document any direct influence, Berio’s annotated copy of “stinging” appears analogous to Cummings’ aforementioned poem “two / brass / buttons”—both texts exhibit a sensitivity to a poem’s phonetic properties by using columns to connect different families of vowels (and, in the case of “stinging,” consonants). Also worth noting is Cummings’ and Berio’s use of the typewriter to render their texts. The mechanistic and tac-

tile elements of the manual typewriter made it a fitting tool to shape typographical space in the manner illustrated here.

Berio's Instrumentation and Cummings' Text

In Movement V, Berio employs 22 different percussion instruments. How systematically does he utilize them in relation to Cummings' text? In particular, how does Berio (as stated in the Varga interview) "group the instruments around the text, reflecting the phonetic families" of the words in the poem? These are questions I hope to answer below, at least in part.

Based upon the varying rates of decay and levels of fixed pitch, I group the twenty-two instruments into five categories (see Table 1).

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Un-pitched Quick Decay	Un-pitched Prolonged Decay	Semi-Tuned Quick Decay	Pitched Slower Decay	Pitched Prolonged Decay
Mexican bean Hi-hat (closed) Maracas	Chinese gong Tam tam Suspended cymbals Hi-hat (open)	Log drum Clap cymbal Tom tom Large bongos Snare drum Tamburo basco Foot pedal Bass drum	Marimba- phone Un-pedaled vibes Lujon Cencerros	Chimes Glocken- spiel Vibraphone Harp Celesta

At the far left of Table 1 (in Group 1), we see that the Mexican bean, closed hi-hat, and maracas are all un-pitched percussion instruments characterized by their quick rate of decay. In Group 5, the chimes, glockenspiel, vibraphone (without damper pedal), harp, and celesta all represent an opposite extreme of pitch specificity and prolonged decay. In between these two categories are three groups of instruments: Group 2 has un-pitched instruments but with a more prolonged decay (Chinese gong, tam tam, suspended cymbals, open hi-hat). Group 3 are all semi-tuned instruments with a quicker rate of decay (log drum, clap cymbal, tom tom, large bongos, snare drum, tamburo basco, foot pedal, bass drum). Group 4 has all pitched instruments but with a slower rate of decay (marimbaphone, vibraphone

without damper pedal, lujon, and cencerros).

Taking into account Document A, one sees in Movement V that Berio concertedly aligns fricative, affricative, or plosive consonants with specific instruments—instruments whose timbre, type of attack, and/or rate of decay aim to match the quality of a particular consonant sound. The consistent alignment of consonants with the percussion and harp is a prime illustration of how “the instruments translate and prolong the vocal behaviors”—what Berio calls “vocal-instrumental bilingualism” (118). In the case of fricative consonants, the frictional quality of the consonant /s/, for example, correlates with the timbre of the suspended cymbal. In the case of the plosive consonants, the aspirated and sharp attacks found in plosives like /b/ and /t/ are matched with accented harp attacks, and short, accented, mallet-struck percussion (e.g., marimbaphone, damper pedaled vibraphone, and lujon). By immediately following their corollary phoneme(s), the instruments *prolong* the quality of a certain phoneme; in other, more limited cases, by preceding their corollary phoneme(s), the sonority of the instruments is translated into a “vocal behavior,” thus *anticipating* the timbre of a part of a word.

TABLE 2			
Fricative/Affricative Consonants	Prolonged Decay	Quick Decay	
	A l l U n - p i t c h e d		
	Suspended Cymbal	Hi-hat	Maracas and Mexican Bean
fric. /s/ “stinging”		X	X
/s/ “swarms”	X		
/s/ “dreams”	X		
/th/ “the spires”		X	
th/ “the litanies”		X	
affr. /ch/ “chants”	X		

Berio is very attracted to the sibilant consonants in the text, and, as we have seen, notes their placement within a given word. He aligns 13 sibilant consonants in Column 1 of Document A. From this array, Berio selects

a set of six sibilants and matches them with a set of percussion instruments in Movement V.

Berio matches the frictional quality of the fricatives /s/ and /th/ and affricative /ch/ with the timbres of the Mexican bean, maracas, hi-hat, and/or suspended cymbal (see Table 2).

There are two cases where the fricative consonant sound /th/ is directly accompanied by the hi-hat: in “the” before “the spires,” and in “the” before “the litanies.” In the first case, the hi-hat precedes the utterance of /th/, and in the second case, the hi-hat follows it. Also, /s/, the fricative consonant that begins Movement V, is immediately preceded by the Mexican bean, hi-hat, and maracas. Moreover, there are three instances where the suspended cymbal prolongs the timbre of the sibilants /s/ and /ch/: (1) the /s/ that ends “swarms”; (2) the /ch/ that begins “chants”; and (3) at the end of the piece—the /s/ that terminates the word “dreams.”

Twelve plosive consonants are aligned in Column 3 of Document A. From these, Berio selects seven plosives and groups them with a set of percussion instruments (see Table 3).

Plosive Consonants	Harp with accent	All hard mallet struck, quick decay			
		Cencerros	Lujon	Vibraphone (dampened)	Marimba
/g/ “stinging”	X		X		X
/g/ “gold”	X	X			
/g/ “great”	X	X	X	X	
/b/ “bells” (1st)	X			X	X
/d/ “lewd”	X		X	X	X
/b/ “bells” (2nd)	X		X	X	X
/t/ “tall”	X			X	X

In three instances the plosive /g/ is matched with mallet-struck, quickly decaying percussion, and short, accented attacks in the harp. For example, the first /g/ in “stinging”¹² is met with the marimbaphone, lujon, and harp, as well as the simultaneous striking of the tamburo basco, snare drum, and foot pedal bass drum by the second percussionist. The two /g/’s in “gold” and “great” show a similar approach. The plosive /g/ in “gold” correlates with the mallet-struck cencerros and the sixteenth notes in the harp, while the /g/ in “great” is similarly met with cencerros, accented harp attack, as

well as accented, hard mallet attacks in the lujon and dampened vibraphone.

The remaining four instances show how Berio treats the plosives /b/, /d/, and /t/ similarly. The timbre of the plosives that begin the words “tall” and “bells” (first appearance) are both met by the timbre of the marimbaphone, harp, and vibraphone. In the case of the word “bells” (first appearance), all three instruments use accented attack, with the marimbaphone and pedaled vibraphone in quick decay. With the word “tall,” all three of these instruments also have accented attacks, but a comparatively longer rate of decay (see Table 3).

Berio treats the remaining two plosives in like fashion. In particular, the /d/ in “lewd” and the /b/ in “bells” (second instance) present an interesting case. Here, an instance of accented, hard mallet-struck instruments with rapid decay (coupled with accented, short notes in the harp) is inserted between two plosives: the /d/ that ends “lewd,” and the /b/ that begins “bells.”¹³ The set of percussion instruments employed here closely resembles those used in the other five plosives discussed above, because Berio uses the marimba, lujon, and pedaled vibraphone, as well as short, accented notes in the harp. In this way, the “translation” of the “vocal behaviors” is fluid: the choice of percussion *anticipates* a related timbre stated by a plosive in the vocal line, which then leads to the subsequent timbre of the percussion—in effect, creating Berio’s vocal-instrumental bilingualism.

In his musical setting of “stinging,” Berio clearly does not take advantage of every consonant identified in his annotation of this text. Of the eight appearances of /th/ in the poem, it appears that only two of them are intended to match the timbre of the percussion (e.g., the hi-hat). In contrast, of the twelve plosive consonants presented in Column 3 of Document A, seven are deliberately matched with the appropriate percussion.

Berio’s treatment of vowels proves more elusive. If plosives tend to be met by short, accented, mallet percussion, and fricatives by frictional-sounding, un-pitched instruments like the suspended cymbal, one might suspect that certain long vowel sounds would be met with instruments characterized by a comparatively longer rate of decay (and a greater level of fixed pitch). The most plausible examples of such treatment appear in the setting of the last few words in the poem. The extended melisma on the long vowel sound of [i] in “sea” is prolonged by the first appearance of the chimes, as well as sustained half notes in the harp and the un-dampened vibraphone. The vowel that closes the work, the long [i] in “dreams,” is

prolonged by slowly decaying notes in the chimes, vibraphone, and harp. This switch towards chimes and sustained vibraphone at the end of the movement represents a shift toward one extreme of the instruments laid out in Table 1 (Group 5). Here, the instrumentation used to close the work is characterized by its sense of fixed pitch and prolonged rate of decay—quite different from the instrumentation used to begin the movement (Group 1 in Table 1). Thus, in the course of Movement V, Berio’s instrumentation runs the range of the percussion laid out in Table 1—from quickly decaying unpitched percussion, through final statements of pitched percussion using a comparatively slower rate of decay.

Conclusion

In the musical setting of these three poems by Cummings, we witness a continuing trend in Berio’s treatment of texts: he seems concerned more with the musical potential of a poem’s phonetic properties than with its semantic elements. A similar *modus operandi* is at play in his *Sequenza III* (1966), where a phonetically deconstructed text formulates a complex mosaic of phonemes, words, and short phrases, as linear comprehension of the poem is lost. Perhaps the visual element of Cummings’ three original poems inspired Berio’s own layout of “stinging” in Document A, leaving him uninhibited to explore a phoneticized model based on such a visual arrangement.

A musical encounter with *Circles* could condition the way one perceives or performs an out-loud reading of a poem like “stinging.” While part of another inquiry, Berberian’s interpretation of Movement I clearly accentuates the onomatopoetic properties in Cummings’ poem. An experience with her performance could then be transferred to a reading of the poem itself, bringing out the phonetic properties that attracted Berio and Berberian from the outset. Clearly in *Circles*, poem and song form a symbiotic relationship.

Much of this essay has explored momentary effects in Berio’s *Circles*, but larger implications should not be ignored: the techniques employed here by Berio draw upon his work in the electronic studio. For example, the way that a vocal timbre is deliberately preceded and followed by a specific set of percussion timbres resembles echo and pre-echo in works that employ magnetic tape. Moreover, in *Remembering the Future*, Berio specifically explains that his approach to *Visage* (a 1961 tape piece featuring Berberian’s voice) and *Circles* was quite similar: “I was particularly involved

in developing different degrees and modes of continuity between the human voice, instruments, and a poetic text, or between vocal sound-families and interrelated electronic sounds. *Circles . . .* and *Visage . . .* were the result of this development” (18). Overall, Berio shapes vocal sounds in *Circles* according to their proposed relationship to other non-vocal, often un-pitched, complexes of sound. As we have seen, the opposite is also true, since these complexes of sound can affect the vocal line. He accomplishes all of this in a manner similar to how he creates “modes of continuity” between the voice and “interrelated electronic sounds” in a work like *Visage*. Document A, the only extant document that deals with the treatment of the text in *Circles*, serves as an outline of the phonetic possibilities that made Cummings’ poem appealing to Berio. From this outline, Berio, in a liberal, yet reasonably systematic fashion, develops a multi-layered amalgam between text and timbre, voice and instrument.

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Notes

1. Berio, Luciano. Letter to E. E. Cummings. 21 Oct. 1960. TS. bMS Am 1823 (96). E. E. Cummings Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Included here with kind permission of Talia Pecker Berio and the E. E. Cummings Trust.
2. Cummings, E. E. Letter to Luciano Berio. 16 Nov. 1960. TS. Berio Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, Switzerland. Included here with kind permission of Talia Pecker Berio, the Paul Sacher Foundation, and the E. E. Cummings Trust.
3. Berio, Luciano. Letter to E. E. Cummings. 24 Nov. 1960. TS. bMS Am 1823 (96). E. E. Cummings Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Included here with kind permission of Talia Pecker Berio and the E. E. Cummings Trust.
4. In the interview with Varga, Berio relates the history of his contact and friendship with Eco: “I met Eco in Milan in the mid-fifties. We soon discovered that we took a similar interest in poetry and within it, onomatopoeia: I introduced him to linguistics and he introduced me to Joyce. . . . Without Eco, *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* wouldn’t exist. Both of us were fascinated by onomatopoeia in poetry and after having

- gone through Italian literature, we addressed ourselves to Joyce” (142).
5. Berio used the work of James Joyce for many vocal works in the 1950s and early 60s, resulting in compositions like *Chamber Music* (1953) and *Epifanie* (1959-1961)—both of which are based on texts by Joyce. Osmond-Smith, in his article “The Tenth Oscillator: The Work of Cathy Berberian 1958-1966,” comments on the genesis of *Thema*: “All three [Berio, Berberian, and Eco] would gather at the Via Moscato apartment for supper, then get to work. Berberian read a passage from *Ulysses* in English, and Eco followed with the same passage in French (there was as yet no reliable Italian translation). They were fascinated by the onomatopoeic qualities of the ‘overture’ to the Sirens chapter—and decided to try for a radio programme on onomatopoeia in English literature, scripted by Leydi, and concluding with Berio’s electronic elaboration upon Joyce’s text, read in several languages” (3).
 6. Berio elaborates upon this in the interview: “Certainly, *Thema* was of basic significance in my work because through it I experienced the text not as a closed, unchangeable object but as one whose meaning and sound both allow the proliferation of new functions. *Circles*, written two years later, is in many ways related to the basic idea of *Thema*. Here, too, I worked with an English text—three poems by e.e. cummings which form a transition from the simple to the complex. I did not write a piece for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment, but rather one where there is a very strong connection between the phonetic quality of the text and the musical texture. The poems generate or determine innumerable musical events and the vocal part often seems to be generated by the instrumental ones. That is how I was able to explore the intrinsic quality of the poetry. The musical material was so complex that I felt I had to return to the same poems a second time, in the following order: 1-2-3-2-1. However, the second time round the second poem is linked to musical material from the first setting of the first poem” (144).
 7. A partial transcription of the original sketch (Document A) appears on page 48. Berio’s hand-written annotations to the poem have been excluded. See endnote 11 for a summary of these annotations.
 8. To a certain degree, Columns 1 and 2 share similar types of consonants, yet these two columns differ subtly. All sibilant fricatives and affricatives in Column 1 are part of consonant clusters, with the exception of “fat,” “silver,” and “sea” (these three words all contain isolated

consonant phonemes in first position). Column 2 aligns the second consonant of a consonant cluster (e.g., the /t/ in “stinging,” or the /h/ in “the”); thus, the second column lacks isolated phonemes in first position. The one exception of a word in Column 2 that has a consonant cluster made of a plosive consonant is the /d/ in “dragging.” The scan of the original sketch suggests that the hand-written inclusion of “dragging” could have been an afterthought, since the typed inclusion of “dragging” was crossed out in ink.

9. Berberian’s performance clearly articulates the /g/ sound as a plosive in “stinging,” rather than its being just part of the consonant blend /ng/.
10. It appears that Column 4 of Document A was an afterthought, since the typed appearances of “with,” “lewd,” and “wind” are crossed out, and their subsequent placement in Column 4 is hand-written (represented by italics in the transcription).
11. Christoph Neidhöfer’s illuminating article on *Circles* deciphers Berio’s handwriting on this sketch and provides some insight: “‘Sting’ inspires the more general musical gesture of anacrusis-stress-decay, for which he considers the harp attack to be best suited (*‘attacco di arpa il meglio’* [attack of the harp the best]). Further down we find a first overall plan for the movement. The harp will gradually include more noises, approaching the /s/-sounds at the end of the poem (*‘arpa si avvicina alla presenza di rumore proposta delle s’* [harp approaches the presence of noise in regard to the ‘s’]). The ‘unification’ process between harp and voice—they sound more and more like each other as the voice reaches the end of the poem—will be imitated by the two percussion parts and harp (*‘Poi i 3 strumenti ripetono in breve lo stesso “percoso” di unificazione graduale’* [Then the three instruments briefly repeat the same ‘path’ of gradual unification]).” Thus, Neidhöfer explains that Berio sketched some thoughts next to the annotated poem in preparation for composing Movement I—the translation of Berio’s notes substantiates this. Berio’s commentary in *Remembering the Future* (published in 2006) provides more context; in it, he explains how he intended the percussion to match the phonetic families in the source text (quoted here for reference): “The choice and use of the percussion instruments and of the harp are dictated by specific phonetic models: the instruments play, so to speak, the voice and the words. They play different modes of attack, vowels and consonants (fricatives, sibilants, plosives, and so on).” Such commentary prompts further avenues

of interpretation for Document A. Since the vocal line in Movement I is accompanied by harp alone, it is plausible that Document A could be applied to the instrumentation of Movement V, which is supported by Berio's aforementioned commentary and justifies the focus of this paper. My support is drawn from just a few notes in this sketch. In the upper right-hand corner, Berio jotted down some words in what appears to be a lighter pen, suggesting a sitting separate from the one including the notes first written and translated above. These notes read as follows: "attack – STING, prep. Trans. decay." I argue that the inclusion of "attack" and "decay" shows that Berio was considering instrumentation that had widely varying types of attack and decay. When compared to the use of the percussion ensemble in Movement V, the harp in Movement I is more limited with respect to its different levels of attack and decay. Also, the inclusion of "prep." could stand for "preparation," while "Trans." could mean "translation." Thus, Berio devised an instrumentation capable of attacks and timbres meant to anticipate and translate certain phonemes. Taken together, these elements support my interpretation of Movement V and suggest that Berio returned to this sketch when he began to compose the movement. For related information and a color scan of the complete sketch, see my article "Compositional Approach and the Work of E. E. Cummings in Luciano Berio's *Circles*." See also Christoph Neidhöfer, "Berio at Work."

12. Berberian's performance clearly articulates the first /g/ in "stinging" as its own plosive consonant, rather than merely sounding as part of the consonant blend /-ng/.
13. Because the plosive /t/ from "fat" is neither circled nor aligned as being related to the plosives in Columns 3 and 4 of Document A, it appears that Berio ignored this plosive, perhaps because it did not serve his creative needs.
14. On their webpage, the Audio Engineering Society defines "pre-echo." "Print-through is the undesired low level transfer of magnetic fields from one layer of analog tape to another layer on the tape reel. Pre-print, also known as pre-echo, is the print-through signal that is on the outer layer of tapewind, thereby preceding the recorded signal. Post-print, or post-echo, is when the print-through signal follows the recorded signal." The result of this process is a "shadow" presence of an audio artifact that precedes or follows its actual appearance.

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